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Homemakers' chat

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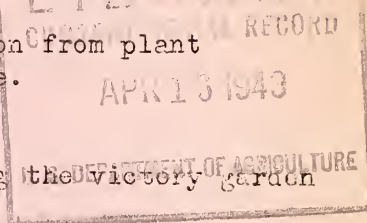
U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Douglass-6017

Wednesday, March 17, 1943

SUBJECT: "A HEAD START FOR THE VICTORY GARDEN." Information from plant scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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A number of inquiries have come in lately about getting the victory garden off to an early start by planting seeds indoors.

Plant scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture say that the way to have early vegetables, especially in northern climates, is to get ahead of the weather by starting seeds indoors, unless you plan to buy plants from local green-houses. Other years northern gardeners have bought early tomato plants--or cabbage, pepper or onion plants that were grown in the South and shipped north. This year with labor and shipping short, you may not be able to buy these southern-grown plants. So you may be wise to raise your own.

If you are going to plant seeds indoors, the time to do it is now--or in the next few weeks at the latest. And the place is any sunny window in your house. Of course, if you have a hotbed, you will start your early vegetable plants there. But building a hotbed is too much trouble for many home gardeners--and it also requires considerable skill.

The list of vegetables you can start indoors is a long one. In your sunny windows you can start tomato plants, eggplant, pepper plants, early cabbage, even lettuce and celery. You can also start beets indoors and have the first beet greens in the neighborhood.

In the northern States you really have to start such plants as tomatoes, peppers and eggplant indoors if you are to get enough of a crop before cold weather arrives in the fall.

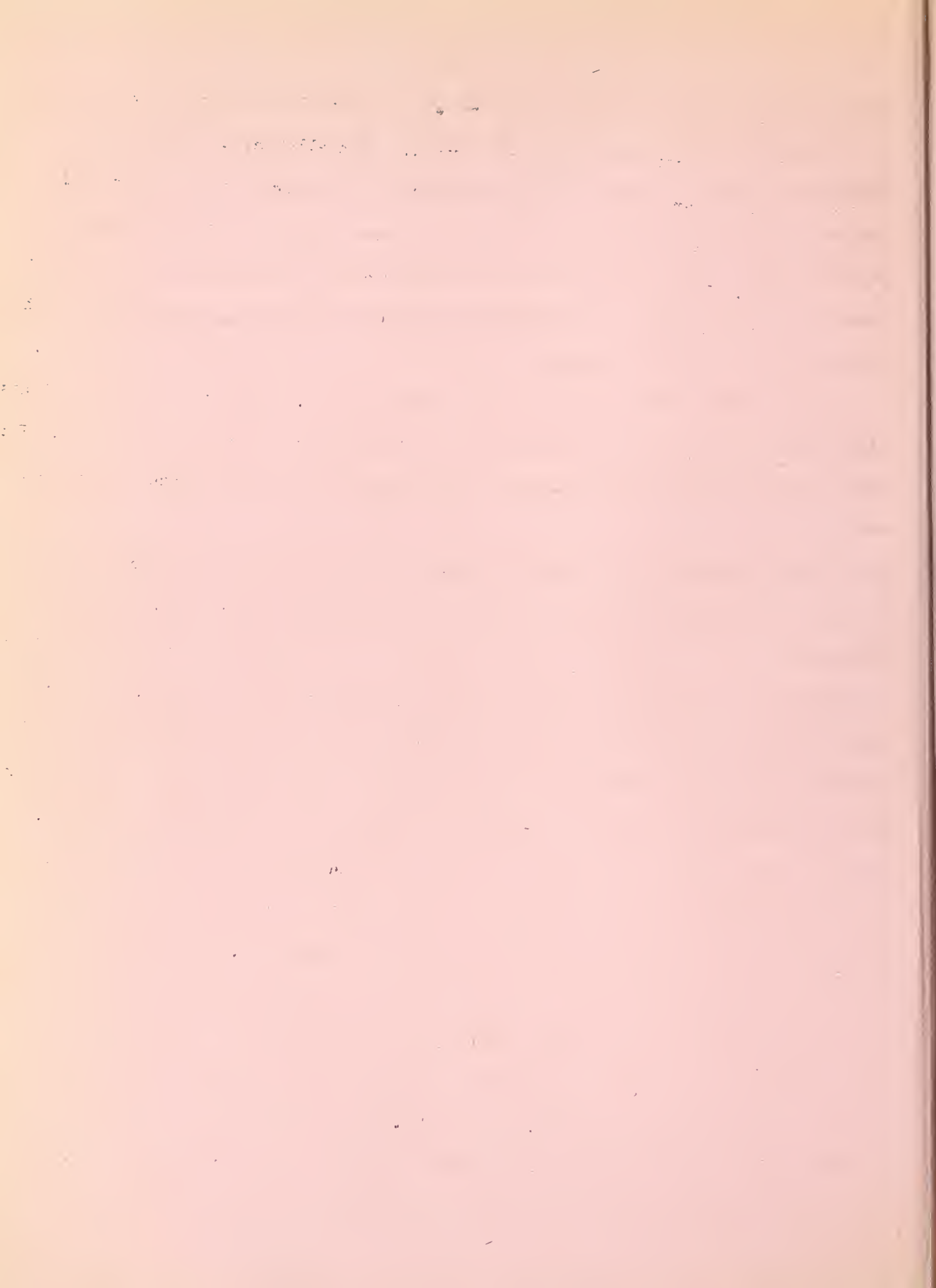
Plant the seeds of tomato, pepper and eggplant at the same time--and make it



about 8 weeks before the date of setting them outdoors in the garden. Allow about one week for the plants to appear aboveground. Then allow about 2 weeks or so before the plants are large enough to transplant to a larger box. Be sure all danger of frost is past before you set young tomato, pepper or eggplant outdoors in the garden. Lettuce and cabbage are hardier about cold weather. A good way to be sure of lettuce early in the season is to plant lettuce seed indoors within the next few weeks and then transplant the seedlings to a bed or rows in the garden. Lettuce can stand a light frost. So can early cabbage. You can set cabbage plants in the garden quite early if you "harden off" the plants in cold frames first. For a small garden plant perhaps a fourth of the seeds in a 5 cent package of cabbage seed.

Now about planting seeds indoors. Market gardeners start their seedlings in what they call "flats." Flats are shallow wooden boxes or trays 2 or 3 inches high and of a size to handle easily filled with soil. You can make your own flats by sawing off the bottom of a soap box about 3 inches to form a tray. Any flat wooden box that will fit into your sunny windows will do for starting plants. You can even start a few cabbage-and tomato plants for a very small garden in a cigar box, or a shallow tin pan with a few holes punched in the bottom for drainage.

Fill your trays or boxes with good garden loam containing a little sand. Sift the soil carefully to make it smooth and fine. Then put it in the oven of your stove until it is thoroughly hot but not baked or scorched. A couple of hours in a very slow oven is a good rule. The heat kills weed seeds and disease organisms, especially those harmful to young, tender plants. Sift the fine soil into the trays, moisten it, and press it down with a board to make it firm. Take a ruler and make little grooves or furrows in the soil about 2 inches apart. Into these furrows scatter seeds of tomato, early cabbage, sweet pepper, or eggplant. Shake the seeds in carefully and slowly in rows. Cover them by sifting a little soil



over the top of the box. Smooth off the top gently and water lightly.

Beginners at gardening often have trouble watering the soil without disturbing the seeds. One way to do it is to set the box in a pan of water and let the water soak up from the bottom. Another way is to cut a piece of tissue paper just the size of the box; lay the paper over the soil; and sprinkle water on top of the paper. By the time the seeds come up, the paper will be well-soaked and the seedlings can easily push through.

Keep the boxes of seeds where the temperature is about 70 degrees day and night. Six or 8 days after planting the green tips of the seedlings will appear. From then on the plants need constant care and plenty of water. Because they naturally bend toward the light as they grow, turn the box each day to keep the plants from growing crooked. Just as soon as the little plants are large enough to handle, transplant them to larger boxes and set them 2 inches apart in each direction.

From these window boxes, the young plants will go into a cold frame--or a hot-bed if you have one. Or if all danger of frost is past, set them directly into the garden. That's a story to tell a little later. Right now you have plenty to do getting your seeds, boxes, and soil ready for planting around the middle of March.

